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ABSTRACT

Part of a series offering focused, authoritative treatments of subjects of current interest to educators and other readers, this fastback focuses on the topic of humor, particularly its usefulness in instruction. The fastback asserts that humor can increase attention and retention across curricular areas, create a more positive school climate, motivate and interest, stimulate creative problem solving, and integrate social isolates. The fastback's sections discuss positive reasons to use humor, provide a short history of humor, describe its developmental stages, discuss the process of humor and humor theories, and offer ways for teachers to use humor to improve the educational process. (Contains 48 references.) (EV)

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Learning Through Laughter . . . Again

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Cornett dedicates this fastback to all those who have filled her life with laughter: Robyn, Bob, Sarah, Liza; old friends: Sandy at PDK, Virginia, Rudy, and Louise; new friends: Marion, Frank, Kristy, Ava, and Mary Lou, and such special students as Christina. But first and last, to Charles, "who still makes me laugh every day."

Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

Learning Through Laughter . . . Again

by
Claudia Cornett

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This fastback is sponsored by the Broward County Florida Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa International in memory of George Hamerick Jr., M.D., whose estate made possible this sponsorship. Dr. Hamerick, an honored graduate of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine and recognized by Mensa, was a staunch advocate of education.

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Introduction

> Laughter occurs in the space between what is and what ought to be.
>
> — Frank Mayes

The past decade in education was dominated by research in multiple intelligences. Gardner's "maybe list" of intelligences includes humor. Consider how humor measures up against critieria for intelligence (Armstrong 1994; Checkley 1997). It is processed in *specific areas of the the brain* in both hemispheres. The thinking processes used are parallel to creative problem solving (Miller 1999; Murdock and Ganim 1993; Gardner 1981). Humor develops in *cognitive stages* starting with infants smiling at familiar faces. Riddle structures and such nonverbals as winking form a *symbol system* to communicate humor. Finally, humor *benefits every culture,* offering relaxation and entertainment, as well as new perspectives. Humor is a "social lubricant," allowing us to test messages and "break the ice" for communication (Buxman 1991).

Humor is a sense — a way to understand. It is a way of knowing that involves communication of incongruous relationships. It helps us discern socially appropri-

ate behavior as we learn the difference between being laughed *at* versus others laughing *with* us. Jokes give joy and teach language nuances. Beginning with pre-riddles, children learn to use humor to solve problems. Newspaper cartoons give alternative views as we laugh at issues in politics, religion, race, and gender relationships. Humor and insight are intellectual relatives; after the "ha-ha comes the ah-ha"(Koestler 1979). But unlike other cognitive processes, humor has unique physiologic results: laughter, smiling, and a feeling of levity.

Humor is highly regarded in our lives. Eighty percent of television shows are comedies. Political cartoons and the comics are newspaper fixtures. Syndicated columnists, such as Dave Barry, rely on humor, as do most commercials. An Amazon.com search yielded 20,868 humor books, 1,178 were joke and riddle books. Even fine art is not exempt, with Warhol's soup cans and Picasso's bicycle seat bull sculpture. We eat Snickers bars and Good Humor Ice Cream. Our lexicon further supports humor's value: "laugh till I cried,""poke fun," and"tickle your funny bone."

Corporations have been quick to use humor research. Fortune 500 companies pay consultants handsomely to demonstrate how punch lines can boost bottom lines. Educators, on the other hand, remain more skeptical. Children prefer humor 50% more than their teachers do (Filmore 1991, Willis 1997). Some teachers still believe, "If you want a well-run classroom, don't smile until Christmas."

We should look *seriously*, not solemnly, at the intentional use of humor to accomplish educational goals.

Humor can benefit students of all backgrounds. Apt humor can increase attention and retention across curricular areas, create a more positive school climate, motivate and interest, stimulate creative problem solving, and integrate social isolates. But, as with any power, humor can be used or abused. Thoughtfulness about how, when, and why to employ humor will ensure, in humor consultant Joel Goodman's words, that we "elevate, not devastate." We really can learn better through laughter.

SMILES: Get Serious About Humor

> Humor at its best is a kind of heightened truth — a supertruth.
>
> — E.B. White

Taxonomies with as many as 20 categories detail why people use humor (Wanzer and Frymier 1999). Here are educational reasons:

S = Stress Relief and Therapy

Skeptics of the "humor-as-a-cure" claim (Cousins 1979) cannot deny how a hearty laugh feels good. Physiological reasons include increased oxygen in the blood; exercising the lungs, diaphragm, face muscles, and even arms and legs (as in knee-slapping); a drop in heart rate and blood pressure; and increased production of natural pain suppressants (endorphins). Anticipatory tension created in initial phases of joke or storytelling subsides after laughter and falls below the pre-joke level. Relaxation may last 45 minutes (Fry 1993). Humor can restore homeostasis and equilibrium, change behavior, and deliver a feeling of well-being (Provine 2000).

Thus one reason for increasing humor at school is for the health of it. Being in a good humor also causes the brain's reticular activating system to allow access to higher-order functions, which thaws brain freeze when taking tests. Just recall an embarrassing moment, childhood toy, or funny person. Mirth is a stress buffer. Researchers at Loma Linda University School of Medicine claim laughter positively affects neuroendocrine and stress hormones that are "substances capable of modifying the immune system" (Berk and Nanda 1998). Laughter increases the activity of cells that fight and prevent disease (Donnelly 1997).

M = Motivation

Resistance to learning can melt in the face of humor. It turns frustration into fun. Humor is intrinsically motivating. Humor arrests us with its novelty, conflict, and challenge. Humor stimulates both brain hemispheres, coordinates the senses, and produces a "unique level of consciousness. . . the brain is at its fullest capacity" (Grierson 1986, p. 6). We pay attention because we want the "natural high" from laughter. The chemical explanation for this motivational response is that laughter triggers the production of catecholamine, which boosts alertness. When incongruity is resolved, the buildup of cognitive energy is no longer needed, so we laugh it off — "chopping up breaths into 15th of a second blasts of little vowel sound pulses"(Provine 2000). There is also a feeling of satisfaction and pride following successful humor problem solving.

Fast-paced, relevant humor can activate listening. Interest can then be maintained by injecting relevant humor throughout instruction. For example, Stamidis (1999) used humor as an integral part of her teaching with a prison population described as "resistant." For example, when students began chatting during a lesson, she said, lightheartedly, "Excuse me for talking while you're interrupting." Stamidis had one of the highest attendance rates in the Connecticut Department of Correction's school district.

Of course, students need to be taught when a "humor frame" is desired. Given this cue, students report a high value for teachers who display a sense of humor and invite them to approach learning playfully. The climate is inviting, and students feel more relaxed, take more risks, and think more flexibly. Laughing together increases cooperation and productivity. Strategic humor builds social cohesion, so students feel a part of a group working toward important goals.

I = Image Builder

When students figure out a riddle, they feel smart. The smile of pride in "getting it" is apparent. In addition, when people share humor, they feel better because they've made others feel more cheerful. People think well of those, such as Bill Cosby, who give laughter without giving offense. It is hard to not like someone who makes you laugh. Being liked is a component of a positive self-image.

People who create and appreciate humor are viewed as more intelligent and creative. What's more, appreci-

ating and creating humor is correlated with IQ and creativity. Wit is connected to intelligence, humor production, and comprehension; and these are associated with academic and social competence (Masten 1989). Humor is a major characteristic of "giftedness" used by the highly intelligent to explore social, moral, and ethical issues. Significant correlations exist between comprehension of cartoons and jokes and cognitive levels (Holt and Willard-Holt 1995).

L = Learning Facilitation

A high school boy once told me he would have dropped out except for his history teacher. "I never knew presidents were so funny. Lincoln, Reagan, Kennedy — they were smart guys," he said. "I like being 'humorized'." His teacher, like skilled public speakers, used humor to capture attention and change attitudes.

Imagine starting a unit on the presidents with the story about Lincoln at the theatre. He took his seat, removed his top hat, and put it on the empty chair next to him. The lights went down, the play began. A large woman came in late and spotted the vacant seat. She pushed by the president and sat down. Mr. Lincoln turned to her and said, "Madam, I could have told you it wouldn't fit before you tried it on"(Regniers 1965).

Fun is fundamental to learning. Humor's facilitative effects stem from its attention-getting capabilities, coupled with persisting levels of alertness after laughter. Humor enhances long-term retention and makes learning enjoyable (Grierson 1986). But empirical work on the direct effects of humor on learning is divided. One

problem is humor's complexity. Is the subject laughing because he understands, to conceal that he does not understand, or to be polite. Some studies used college students in artificial settings, rather than actual classrooms, and lasted as little as 10 minutes (Wanzer and Frymier 1999). Responses of males and females differ, too. Then there are the types of humor, from slapstick to satire. To say that humor can increase learning must be followed with an explanation of what kind of humor, how it was used, how often, by whom, and at what developmental stages. Here are points from research that does support the intentional use of humor strategies.

1. *Humor involves problem solving. It demands use of higher-order thinking skills.* Here is a riddle: What do you call a teacher who had a shark bite off her left arm and left leg? The question creates arousal and demonstrates how humor gets attention. Assuming you can't just remember the answer (literal recall), can you predict possible answers? Did you notice key words like "left"or "teacher" (analysis)? Perhaps visual images pop up. Did you "read between the lines" and think about multiple meanings of words (interpretation)? Can you give an original answer (synthesis)? Here's the punchline: Always Right!

Maybe you laughed or smiled when the nonsense made sense — in two different ways. Whatever it's laugh rating, this riddle makes a key point: humor stimulates higher-order thinking skills. It is an aspect of creativity. We usually "start to think creatively at the time [we] start to think humorously" (Morreall 1981, p. 369).

Creative thinking involves thinking originally, bizarrely, from a new perspective, and so does humor (Koestler 1979).

Repeated riddling, interpreting cartoons, and connecting word meanings in humorous stories are likely candidates to increase thinking skills. In the 21st century, it is this higher-order thinking, especially creative thinking, that will provide answers to new problems.

2. *Relevant humor can increase retention of content and skills.* At the primary level, tongue twisters can attune students to phonemes, a necessary reading skill. However, connecting humor to the content being studied is critical. Unrelated humor distracts attention from the lesson's purpose.

3. *Teacher-initiated, playful, and innocent humor creates a supportive and positive climate in which students are more comfortable.* Mean-spirited humor, such as sarcasm, is often misinterpreted and has negative effects. "Put down" remarks may be laughed at, but most students resent this kind of humor. Teachers who use hostile or sexual humor may lose rapport with students.

4. *Humor materials and strategies are effective tools for developing literacy and communication.* Humor is a critical dimension of verbal communication and a top indicator of effective presentations (Pierson and Bredeson 1993). Humor is used to persuade, clarify, and make points memorable. Verbal humor requires a speaker and listeners. Reading is needed to find material. Consider the vocabulary and background needed to comprehend a joke popular after the 2000 presidential election: Did

you know the whole country is suffering from ED? . . . Electile Dysfunction.

5. *Figurative language and word play are humor staples.* This explains why humor is a "superior tool for accessing the relation between different aspects of linguistic awareness and early reading success" (Mahony and Mann 1992). One Title I teacher used knock-knocks with first-graders. They read riddles aloud, discussed words, and wrote riddles. At the end of a month, they didn't want to stop, so the teacher introduced tongue twisters.

Children report feeling happy after experiencing humorous books and poems and often choose books because they know humor is present. Interest accounts for 30 times the variance in reading success, and humor provokes interest. Potentially serious literacy problems can be addressed using a curriculum riddled with fun.

6. *Humor reveals diverse cultural values.* Humor that degrades women, minorities, and religions still persists. Are the ribald jokes packaged in best-sellers like *Distasteful, Disgusting, Dirty Jokes Stolen from the Internet* funny to you? Historian Barbara Tuchman claims their popularity reflects a "breakdown of decency."

Children learn powerful value lessons from our humor. When it mocks, children are sure to notice. No amount of declaring, "I was only joking," sways listeners from the truth. "Tell me what you laugh at and I'll know who you are."

7. *Humor helps solve problems.* Humor helps us cope with seemingly insolvable problems by giving us dis-

tance, at least temporarily. The strain of losing a loved one can be lessened when there is time to laugh about shared memories.

8. *Instructional closeness is created by use of spontaneous and innocent humor.* Humor is an important tool to establish "immediacy" between teacher and students. Psychological closeness positively influences learning. Teachers who are consistently in a good humor and who use humor strategies are more likely to enhance learning. The best teachers don't overdo it.

E = Embarrassment Salve

We all mispeak, misstep, and misspell. Humor is an important tool for "saving face" during difficult moments. Students can learn to laugh it off when they are embarrassed. But this is learned behavior.

Children in conflict have a particular incentive to develop humor skills. Whether they do so or not depends on how the adults in their lives respond. Case histories of professional clowns, comedians, and comedy writers reveal a pattern of adults who acted as humor models. In addition, when humor is reinforced, children initiate humor more frequently.

Laughing at yourself comes with maturity and humility. It requires empathy. A socially disastrous incident quickly is rendered impotent if we learn to poke fun at ourselves and allow others to laugh with us. All can enjoy the bonds of laughter. Instead of using fists, knives, or guns to save face, students can learn to laugh it off.

S = Social Bonding

A sign below a mirror in the Toledo Board of Education reads, "Smile. It improves your appearance." There is a positive relationship between teachers' use of humor and teacher evaluations (Wanzer and Frymier 1999). Groups who smile and laugh stay together, produce and invent more, and work more cohesively (Wallinger 1997, p. 29). Laughing together creates feelings of belonging, giving a sense of security so there is less anxiety and more participation. And the larger the group, the louder the laugh! Even preschoolers engage in "group glee" (Honig 1977). Laughter is truly contagious, even when it is canned.

Special needs students, such as those with language delays, may not know how to share humor. They often have difficulty telling jokes and understanding word play. The experience of being left out is painful. Fortunately, humor can be taught. Dina (1999) taught an autistic child with Asperger's Syndrome to smile, then chuckle, and eventually to understand and share humor. She used direct instruction with modeling and coached practice. One day she told C.J. not to interrupt. After several reminders to "wait," she said jokingly, "What part of 'wait' don't you understand?" His reply was, "The T."

Humor often is used by adults to reduce tension about such sensitive topics as sex, religion, and politics. Similarly, humor can assist students in dealing with hostility and aggression. Joking about problems can release tension that might be acted out physically. Humor can

build friendships among competing groups and assuage tension. Educators can use humor to "nudge the deviant member into compliance without generating conflict"(Wallinger 1997, p. 29). For example, there was the substitute who knew how to reverse negative energy. The class pulled the trick of all dropping their books at an appointed time. She went right over to her desk and pushed her books on the floor, too. "Sorry I'm late," she said. The stunned students laughed as she smiled broadly.

Pierson and Bredeson found that effective principals used humor to engender faculty loyalty, bolster morale, alleviate teacher stress, signal openness, sweeten criticism, and "put a human face on bureaucratic organization" (1993, p. 527). Teachers called humor the "seventh sense necessary for effective school leadership."

A Short History of Humor

Laughter: spasmatically uttered inarticulate sounds.

— Charles Darwin

Men have been wise in very different modes; but they've always laughed in the same way.

— Samuel Johnson

It is difficult to define humor because of its complex, multifaceted character and sources. Over a dozen definitions are used in research, and there are nearly a dozen theories of humor (Murdock and Ganim 1993). It is clear that humor is a uniquely human trait.

Over the centuries, views of humor and what makes people laugh have changed. We now find it appalling that Renaissance princes amused themselves with collecting dwarfs, hunchbacks, and other deformed humans. Then there were our revered Pilgrim ancestors, who viewed laughter as a low form of behavior. These 17th century Christians looked askance at any form of comedy, finding it contradictory to "Christian silence, gravity and sobriety; for laughing, sporting, gaming, mocking, jesting, vain talking, etc. is not Christian liberty, nor harmless mirth" (Robert Barclay, *Apology for*

the True Christian Divinity, 1676). Condemnation of laughter actually reaches back to Plato and Aristotle, who thought laughter was ethically objectionable and focused on human vice. However, Aristotle did admit that a person who showed no sense of humor was somehow deficient (Morreall 1981).

Imagine being a female in Victorian England, where "girls and women were permitted to smile in deference or to giggle at the slightest suggestion of impropriety, [but] they were not to laugh with glee. They could be embarrassed but not happy" (Goldstein and McGhee 1972). It is refreshing to find that 500 years ago there was at least one enlightened physician who wrote how laughing "moveth much aire in the breast, and sendeth the warmer spirits outward" (Richard Mulcaster, 16th century).

Unfortunately, laughter still is considered a distraction from serious study by many. Freedom of thought and playfulness with words have never been valued by rigid folk, including political regimes throughout history. Humor was strictly controlled in the Soviet Union, and Hitler was so worried about the power of humor to undermine the Third Reich that he set up "joke courts" to punish those who named their dogs and horses Adolph (Morreall 1981).

Today definitions of humor focus mainly on cognitive aspects of what makes us laugh (usually language play and unlikely visual and auditory images). We still use a cognitive theory of humor first proposed by Beattie (1776): that humor begins with the perception of incongruity — something that is nonsensical, ludicrous,

abnormal, or out-of-the-ordinary. This is a problem-centeredness theory that has interested businessmen, as well as scientists, in humor's strategic use. Of course, the proposition that the source of humor is not happiness, but problems, also appeals to educators who see rich source material in their complicated jobs.

Humor Developmental Stages

One who is humorless is lifeless.

— Virginia Ziegler

Wrinkles merely indicate where smiles have been.

— Mark Twain

Each person's sense of humor is unique, yet we all progress through the same developmental stages that determine how we perceive and produce humor. We inherit predispositions for certain aspects of humor, but how this peculiar sense matures depends on outside stimulation. That is, humor is a result of both nature and nurture.

Studies in the 1940s demonstrated the developmental stages of humor. For example, seven- to 13-year-olds and their teachers were asked to do a variety of activities that would reflect their sense of humor, such as draw a funny picture. While nearly every child found the drawing activity hilarious and went to work with great enthusiasm, 80% of the teachers ignored the drawing assignment (Brumbaugh and Wilson 1940). More recent studies have focused on the importance of cognitive challenge in humor and have found considerable evi-

dence that the growth of humor parallels the growth of cognitive development. For example, joking riddles found to be hilarious by primary children are no longer funny to high school students (Mahony and Mann 1992).

Humor follows a sequential developmental pattern that parallels both intellectual and emotional development. This is not surprising, because appreciating and creating humor is grounded in thinking. The ability to understand humor is a precondition for enjoying it — one must be able to comprehend the "possible" to grasp the "impossible" (Holt and Willard-Holt 1995). In other words, to appreciate humor a person needs to realize there is a violation of what would normally be expected — discrepancies must be perceived. Humor cannot be experienced unless a person realizes that the conceptual shifts are playful tinkerings with reality and not "confusing, preposterous lies" (Morreall 1981, p. 65).

The development of humor is influenced by personality variables; cultural and educational background; fantasy and play opportunities; intelligence, which is positively correlated with preference for certain types of humor; and sex, which accounts for the single largest source of individual differences in sense of humor (Kappas 1965; McGhee 1979).

There is a significant difference in sense of humor between the sexes. As early as age six, differences between male and female humor become obvious: boys initiate more humor, tell more jokes, do more silly rhyming, use more "naughty words," and clown around and make faces more frequently. McGhee (1979) speculates that

the factors leading to humor sex typing may be operating even by age three. By the first grade there is a tendency for boys to laugh more, while girls smile more. Eventually girls come to laugh more, but mostly when others are laughing.

As humor develops, a person moves toward more objectivity, manifested in such high-maturity behaviors as being able to laugh at oneself and at life's absurdities. Unfortunately, the freewheeling creativity of the young child becomes more constrained. While the five-year-old laughs more than 400 times a day, the average adult laughs fewer than 15 (Morreall 1981).

Familiarity with humor developmental stages can help teachers select appropriate humor material for instructional purposes and understand why students see humor in situations that are not funny to teachers. The following stage sequence is derived from the theories of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Jane Loevinger, Paul McGhee, and Nilsen and Nilsen.

Developmental Sequence of Humor

Age	Behavior Exhibited
1 week	Smiles during sleep.
2-4 months	Laughs when tickled or for peek-a-boo games.
2-4 years	Responds to distortions of objects and words; rhyming and nonsense words are funny.
4-6 years	Body functions and noises, taboo words, clowning, silly rhyming, slapstick, chanting, and misnaming are funny. Little capacity for sympathetic humor. Exaggerations are funny, as is any form of surprise. Enjoys word play with names and "pre" riddles: "What did

	the daddy firecracker say to the baby firecracker? You're too little to pop."
7-8 years	Realizes words are not always literal. Practical jokes and others' discomfort is funny.
9-12 years	Concrete puns, conventional jokes, word plays, moron and knock-knock jokes are popular. Gradually, sympathetic humor emerges. Delights in deviations from the norm and taboo subjects. Begins to laugh at self. Marked increase in verbal humor. Use of humor for personal ends, such as channeling negative feelings.
13+ years	Deprecates laughter that is unfeeling. Original good-natured humor, including sarcasm and self-ridicule, are appreciated. Tongue-in-cheek humor, social satire, and irony preferred. Kidding, joking insults, and loud laughter in public may happen. Forbidden topics are not laughed at in mixed company. Verbal wit is increasingly dominant over visual. More use of humor to save face. Parody appears.

Once we become capable of empathy, jokes at another's expense are funny only when we perceive them as not harmful. This cognitive shift toward sympathetic humor occurs as early as third or fourth grade; for example, taunting that formerly produced hilarious laughter is now seen as hurtful. Children now think about how they would feel if they were victims. Unfortunately, even some adults laugh boisterously at incidents that embarrass others, demonstrating that age is no guarantee of maturity.

The Nature of Humor

Humor . . . is essentially a complete mystery.

— E.B. White

Why are some students consistently the butts of jokes? Why do some individuals make frequent sarcastic remarks? Then there are those students who poke fun excessively, and those who persist in drawing attention to themselves by constant clowning. Knowledge about the nature of humor gives insight into these and other student behaviors. By understanding the developmental stages of humor, we can better account for the differing comprehension levels diverse types of humor require.

Teachers who are knowledgeable about the nature of humor can help students analyze their own sense of humor and its effect on others. They can help students learn to use humor appropriately in social situations and teach them how to make it a powerful personal learning tool.

The Process of Humor

In simplified form, humor involves a three-step process: cognitive arousal, problem solving, and reso-

lution. In the arousal stage, we are set up by familiar cues to indicate that the situation is a humorous one. Cues can be anything from a symbol, such as a clown costume, to glistening eyes that signal the tease. Social circumstances influence the arousal process, depending on whether you are with friends or strangers, the same or opposite sex, or in a small or large group. Also, the content, structure, and complexity of the humor have a bearing on the arousal process. For example, most adults have outgrown the knock-knock jokes that bring such delight to primary children. To amuse adults, knock-knock jokes must overcome the simplified structure with a clever play on words or reference to provocative topics for adults (sex, religion, politics). In other words, to be funny, there must be a degree of cognitive challenge inherent in the humor.

Once the cue is seen or heard, the problem-solving process begins to make sense of the nonsense. Anticipating the punch line, using visual imagery, or trying to remember an answer heard before are thinking processes that engage at this point. These mental efforts produce physical and emotional changes (for example, increased pulse rate, mood change). Finally, we "get it." The punch line is delivered and the incongruities are resolved. With resolution comes myriad types of laughing or smiling. These are outlets for emotions stimulated in the arousal step but left hanging during the problem-solving step.

The laughter brought on by tickling is a different response. Koestler points out that babies laugh 15 times more often when tickled by their mothers than by

strangers. It seems that at least two conditions must be met before tickling turns to laughter: 1) tickling must be perceived as a "mock attack," with alternating feelings of security and apprehension, and 2) it must be done by another person; you cannot tickle yourself. Surprise also is an important component of tickling. The "I'm gonna get ya" or "Here I come" heighten the aggressive mood of a tickling episode. As Koestler says, "The best tickler impersonates an aggressor, but is simultaneously known not to be one" (1979).

Humor Theories

While there are more than a dozen theories of humor, three have dominated: incongruity, superiority, and relaxation/release. The first one, and the second to a degree, are cognitively based. The third tries to explain physical aspects of the sense of humor.

Incongruity Theory. Incongruous humor links disparate elements. The flip-flopping process of incongruity-based humor involves two conflicting sets of rules or frames of reference. There must be a reversal of figure and ground. For example, female impersonators are simultaneously man and woman. Koestler describes the effect of the punch line as "the intellect turning a somersault."

Fred Gwynne's books, *The King Who Rained* and *A Chocolate Moose*, use incongruous humor. Gwynne, the former star of the TV series, "The Munsters," created these picture books using a simple device, figurative expressions in our language seen from the point of view of a young child. The illustrations depict the figurative

expressions *literally*. Some favorites are: "Mommy says she sometimes gets a frog in her throat," and "Daddy says our family has a coat of arms." Each of the statements is illustrated with a bizarre, nonsensical picture a child might imagine when hearing the phrase. We laugh because the literal representation of the idiom is in conflict with our language experiences. We also laugh because we "know better" than the inexperienced main character, which brings us to the superiority theory of humor.

Superiority Theory. The superiority theory of humor asserts that humans derive pleasure from seeing themselves as better off and smarter than others. This struggle for superiority explains why morons, fools, clowns, buffoons, gluttons, drunkards, and misers have all served as objects of ridicule. Such is the humor of the Old Testament, in which, out of 29 references to humor, 13 are about scorn, derision, or making fun of someone; only two describe non-aggressive laughter.

Some people feel a need to pick on those less fortunate than themselves by poking fun at them. French philosopher Henri Bergson called this our "unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently to correct our neighbour." We laugh at morons who make mistakes that we would know better than to make. We may, in retrospect, learn to laugh at our own past foibles, feeling superior over what we did or were at that time.

Amelia Bedelia, one of the favorite characters in children's literature, is humorous because she is the caricature of literal-mindedness. She is a maid that behaves like a "dumb" machine, doing exactly as she is told.

When her employer tells her to draw the drapes, she gets out paper and pencil. Children laugh at Amelia's antics when they have the cognitive sophistication to understand how words may have multiple meanings. They feel smarter than Amelia.

This notion of superiority explains why children perceive mispronounced words or mistakes of classmates as opportunities for ridicule. But seeing defects in others usually is humorous to adults only when the defect is perceived not to be painful to the victim. If Stan Laurel really got hurt when he took a pratfall, it would not be funny. The situation must be seen as fantasy or pretense.

Superiority theory also seems to explain how humor can be found in defects of persons who usually are accorded respect. The English teacher who misspells a word, the violin virtuoso whose string snaps during a concert, the corporate president whose fly is unzipped are all funny because they are "larger than life" or above average. For a moment, the superior are inferior to us.

As with incongruity theory, superiority theory does not explain all humor. For example, did you hear the one about the absolutely perfect man who had no friends because no one was perfect enough for him? Feeling lonely, he decided the only solution was to clone himself. When the clone arrived, he was perfect in every way, except for one thing: he spoke only obscenities. The perfect man was appalled. When he could stand it no longer, he decided to murder the clone. He took him to the edge of a cliff and told him to look at the panoramic view. When the clone leaned out, the perfect man pushed him off. That was the first obscene clone fall!

Analysis of the above joke reveals the familiar joke structure: "did you hear the one," and "all except one thing." The listener is cued to use a joke frame of thinking — suspending logic. We believe that there could be an absolutely perfect man and that technology can produce a human clone. The suspension of logic is part of the illusion. At the same time, there is an element of truth — the disgust we have for those who believe themselves infallible and the reality of recent scientific advances in cloning. But in humor, it is the mind game — the puzzle, the mystery to be solved — that intrigues and lures us toward laughter. We play because past experience reminds us of the reward of laughter if we participate in the drama.

The clone joke has several aspects that can be explained by superiority theory. The perfect man is one in whom we hope to find flaws; the clone is a technological or mechanical invention that looks human but has the naughty defect of a foul mouth. There is fascination with scatological humor and obscenity because it is taboo in polite society. We do know better, but humor gives us certain liberties to talk about what we are not supposed to talk about. There is resolution, and we feel smart or superior because we understand. All these elements are part of the joke, but they are mostly background. The punch line is a simple pun, and it is unexpected. The pun works, of course, only if the listener is familiar with the phrase "obscene phone call." In comes the incongruity and it arrives as acoustical humor — rather low level to be sure — but funny because of the surprise.

Release or Relaxation Theory. The emotions of satisfaction and pride are the focus of release theory, but the theory also dwells on the reduction of anxiety and the concomitant relaxed state that laughter produces. Unlike incongruity and superiority theory, release theory is not cognitively based. It is useful for explaining the uniquely human physical response of laughter to a cognitive event and has provoked much of the research on the medicinal effects of humor. For example, Norman Cousins' (1979) personal story of his recovery from a serious connective tissue disease described laughter's painkilling capabilities. His book inspired research that has documented the stimulation and relaxation responses to laughter, as well as the body's signals from laughter to release endorphin (painkiller), catecholamine (alertness hormone), and other immune-boosting substances.

Laughter RX: A Laugh a Day

Humor is contagious. Laughter is infectious. Both are good for you.

— William Fry, M.D.

Mirth is God's medicine.

— Henry Ward Beecher

At first look, laughter seems to serve no biological purpose. However, it is clear that laughter works off tension, as in "nervous laughter." It has long been considered an aid to digestion (recall the court jesters at banquets in medieval times). In addition, humor and laughter control pain by distracting attention, reducing tension, changing expectations, and increasing production of endorphins — the body's natural painkillers. Laughter's ability to cause muscles to suddenly go limp can be of great value in the treatment of stress.

After a good laugh, we feel more relaxed. We sigh, breathe more deeply, and feel renewed. Our mood is positive. Spirits are high. No stress management workshop could offer more!

Here is a daily laughter prescription to ensure that the important work of teaching and learning is fun. The

regime includes strategies to improve health using laughter. The key is to reduce anxiety and raise hope. It is best to start gradually with whatever feels most comfortable — easy stuff, such as smiling more. Begin to relax more and break routines. Post a cartoon or riddle to introduce a topic or review key points. Begin to integrate humor into content areas. Invite students to help you collect material. Finally, increase active engagement using strategies that cause more interaction, such as group work.

Laugh at Yourself

Pundit Ethel Barrymore observed, "You grow up the day you have your first real laugh — at yourself." We all are fools some of the time, but admitting it is a sign of real maturity. Teachers especially need to be able to laugh at the inevitable blunders we will make in front of students. Indeed, the humorless teacher is a caricature or stock character in literature — so unreal as to be a sure source of amusement for students.

In two decades of traveling for Phi Delta Kappa, I have heard many stories from educators about how they learned to laugh at themselves. One of my favorites was from a woman in Texas. Ms. C had been teaching second grade just a few months. One day was particularly stressful. She didn't have a minute to call her own from the first bell, when Joey threw up, to first recess, when Sarah's tooth came out and blood ended up everywhere. About 10:00 a.m., a difficult parent, who had not come to a conference appointment, just showed up. Ms. C gave her class directions for independent work and

stepped into the hall. She wasn't there two minutes when two boys had been fighting over a pencil and it flipped and hit a little girl in her eye with the pointed end. Ms. C did not get to eat lunch because the teacher across the hall started having chest pains. Ms. C took her class until the principal could be called back from a meeting. By 2:30, Ms. C was exhausted, hungry, and was finally able to go to the bathroom. She had waited since early morning, so she was desperate. The nearest toilet was the girls' restroom, so she hurried in, pulling up her skirt while pulling down her pantyhose as she headed for the nearest stall. She was poised to take her seat when she heard from behind her, "NO PLEASE! NO PLEASE!" In her rush, she hadn't noticed a tiny first-grader already on the toilet. Ms. C's experience was not funny at the time. One must be sufficiently distant from such an event to enjoy the incongruity. But she had the teacher's lounge in stitches as she told about her embarrassment a short time later. Ms. C had an epiphany that day about the importance of humor — especially the kind that comes from self-disparagement. Her newfound humility gave her the courage to laugh at herself and thereby allow others to laugh with her.

Laughing at yourself relieves embarrassment and shows self-confidence and control — as long as such self-deprecation is done in moderation. If, in a self-evaluation of your sense of humor, you find this to be a humor deficiency, consider adopting a more playful frame of mind. Poke fun at your own mistakes. Be flexible. Don't take yourself so seriously. As humorist John Cleese puts it, "Take your job seriously, not solemnly."

Make Yourself Laugh

One of the first signs of burnout is the loss or souring of the sense of humor. Burnout has physical and mental consequences, and humor can help with both prevention and recovery.

Humor exercises and then relaxes muscles, increases the production of endorphin, immunoglobulin A (antibodies found in saliva), and catecholamine, a hormone that boosts alertness. Humor also boosts the pain threshold, as revealed in a Texas Tech study. After a good laugh, the pulse rate declines. Laughter increases respiratory activity and oxygenates the blood — you exhale at up to 75 miles per hour with a gusty laugh. Tear ducts get stimulated (Buxman 1991), and blood vessels in the lungs are dilated. Bad cholesterol and such stress hormones as adrenaline and cortisol are reduced. Last, but not least, laughter burns up calories.

Humor relieves stress, fear, discomfort, anger, and embarrassment and creates a wonderful feeling of euphoria. Laughter decreases social distance among people and causes a feeling of connectedness. Rapport is built by laughing together.

To put all this potential medicinal information into practice, Joel Goodman recommends becoming a humor consumer. Look for the lighter, brighter side. He calls this using "mental aikido." (Aikido is a martial art in which power can be removed from a negative force by simply flowing with the direction of the force.) Two examples of mental aikido come to mind from my own experience. First there was the cancer patient I met who had on a T-shirt that said, "Hair by Chemo." Then there

is a friend whose house recently exploded through some defect in the heating system. She is a visual artist and created a poster for herself with one word on it, "POOF!"

A good source of information and resources on humor is the Humor Project in Saratoga Springs, New York. In addition to their annual interdisciplinary conference on humor, they publish a quarterly called *Laughing Matters*, which features interviews with prominent humorists, updates on research, and grant possibilities. Their website is humorproject.com.

Norman Cousins suggests that a Mirth Aid Kit can be an important resource for physical and mental health. Just to be "average," an adult needs to laugh heartily at least 15 times a day. This is not unrealistic if humor breaks for comic relief are a planned as part of the school day. Teachers should set up a specific place to save all the anecdotes, stories, cartoons, and jokes that make them laugh again and again. Put all these pepper-uppers together and pull them out when you need a lift. And don't be selfish with your mirth-aid kit. Grin and share it on bulletin boards, in newsletters, or in the teachers' lounge. Become a humor consumer. Listen and look for humor, in church bulletins, on road signs, in the newspaper, and especially in classrooms.

Make Others Laugh

Max Coderre estimates that students learn and remember up to five times more when they are involved and smiling (1991). However, the type of humor used is a critical variable. Yes, we should grin and share it,

but with care. It is recommended that educators use a balance of physical and vocal humor, with a modicum of self-disparagement because of the different reactions of male and female students. Males find self-deprecation suspicious, while females perceive such humor as building rapport.

Humor builds relationships and laughter brings us closer, so humor can bond a class. The solidarity created through laughing together can be a strong foundation for learning and developing rapport between teacher and student. Thus discipline problems can be treated through gentle teasing and reminders. In fact, humor can help establish discipline boundaries (Wallinger 1997) and is an important tool to soften criticism.

Laughter's stress-reducing potential has prompted teachers to include *obvious* humorous items on tests or to casually joke with students right before a test. Some teachers even plan student-led humor sharing before tests or at breaks during long tests as tension reducers.

Next to taking tests, one of the most tension-filled aspects of teaching is classroom management and discipline. Some class disruptions are overlooked intentionally by the flexible teacher, who puts minor transgressions into perspective. Then there are times when gentle teasing or kidding accomplish more than a vicious scolding. As a preventive measure, smiles and winks can be powerful reinforcements to cause students to want to follow classroom rules and be a part of a class community. Students report they enjoy being around teachers who, by their smiles, show they are comfortable with themselves and like people.

Indeed there are many reasons why educators should purposefully make others laugh, including how humor conveys a self-confidence and increases communication skills.

Think Funny

The classroom of the happy teacher is vastly different than the classroom of the unhappy one. Educators who feel the heavy burden of their problems, but laugh, show they can view problems from a distance, instead of being locked inside the problem — where they become a part of the problem (Moreall 1981). Because humor gives an enlightened perspective, it is an ideal way for teachers to devise creative teaching solutions to learning problems. For example, comedian Jim Carrey must have been a teacher's nightmare. But a creative junior high teacher let him do 10 minutes of stand up on Friday afternoon, *if* he didn't interrupt the class all week (Nilsen and Nilsen 2000, p. 265).

Of course, the most effective humor is content-related and spontaneous. The use of unrelated or irrelevant humor has detrimental effects on information acquisition, particularly for adults. In addition, the use of irrelevant humor undermines instructor-student rapport (Zillman and Bryant 1989). Adults, in particular, respond most positively to humor that is well integrated with content (Grierson 1986).

Teachers should be models for students. This includes showing how a sense of humor gets you through embarrassing moments and enables you to accept prob-

lems that have no solutions. Students learn more from the teachers they laugh with — groups with "wits" have been found to have higher morale, are more task oriented, and are better at solving problems.

Examples abound of teachers' uses of humor to solve teaching-learning problems. Westminster, Colorado, physics teacher Mrs. Ellerbrook used cartoons to present her ten discipline rules. New Paris, Ohio, art teacher Don Simon used cartoons for a completely different purpose — to solve such art problems as what to draw and how. I have used the riddle a day idea to teach nearly every aspect of reading, from phonemic awareness to parts of speech. And then there are the many teachers who fill special needs students with hope through their strategic use of humor.

Laugh with Others, Not at Them

While adults enjoy sarcasm when they are among equals, students are especially vulnerable to sarcasm and public ridicule. If there is any doubt about whether a joke or jibe will be misunderstood or will offend, do not use it.

Everyone needs someone to laugh with, no matter how corny the joke or silly the story. Humor has been found to increase job satisfaction and productivity. Attendance rates increased among workers who enjoyed at least one joking relationship with another person. Humor accomplishes such results by energizing and motivating those who choose to approach life with good humor. By laughing together, we can remain energized to tackle the many problems we face.

Encourage Humor

Instead of "Let's get serious" and "Wipe that smile off your face," sometimes we need to encourage students to get silly, to get funny and laugh — *with*, not *at*, each other. We can permit, reinforce, and use humor as an important teaching tool, as well as teach students how to use humor. To start off, try to recall what makes learning and school fun. When I asked that question of a group of eighth-graders, they didn't hesitate: working in groups, being able to move, knowing mistakes were okay, being encouraged to take risks, and having teachers that used novel teaching strategies, such as "Question of the Day." One of the students still remembered a question from fourth grade: *"What would you least like to step in?"*

Another example comes from San Luis Obispo, California, where a middle school principal promoted the sharing of humor by putting a Humor Barrel by the front door. He invited teachers and kids to drop in "funny bones" on which they wrote favorite riddles. He used the riddles to get attention for the morning announcements.

Create a Happy Climate

Educators can start by displaying posters, playing upbeat music, using art as a response option, and even incorporating toys into teaching. For example, student achievements can be celebrated with plastic clapping hands or balloons. School administrators can take a lead from personnel directors in the corporate world who

intentionally hire those who can make others laugh, who make others want to be there, and who promote a positive humor among others by their own abilities to remain hopeful and optimistic.

One way to direct a self-evaluation of your own abilities to act in this capacity begins with a few reflective questions: What makes you feel positive? How can you make others laugh? How can you create more good will in your school or classroom?

Smile and Laugh More

Employers prize laughter. In one study, 80 out of 100 personnel directors and vice presidents from the thousand largest corporations felt that people with a sense of humor do better at their jobs. There's an old saying that especially applies to teachers: "The day goes the way the corners of your mouth turn."

There is a sign below a large pier mirror in the Toledo, Ohio, Board of Education. It says, "How would you like to look at yourself all day?" One way that we can easily improve what our students have to look at is to just smile more! It improves your appearance and gives your face a break! Keep in mind that the minimum daily requirement for laughter is 15 times, or at least five minutes of hearty laughing each day. Get it wherever and whenever you can. But find a regular supplier because it's addictive.

Get Serious About Humor

Take the humor pledge:

I will:

- Use humor to uplift and elevate, not devastate nor denigrate.
- Take myself lightly and my work seriously, not solemnly.
- Assume others are out to help me, not get me.
- Express my humor physically and freely by showing my enthusiasm or joie de vivre.
- Laugh generously at others' attempts to share humor.
- Conscientiously look for humor in my life each day.
- Make others laugh in a way suited to my personality.
- Add humor to my life each day.
- Use humor to cope with stress.
- And always clean up when I make a mess!

The Punch Line

He who laughs, lasts.

— Norwegian Proverb

You don't teach by limiting. You teach by exciting.

— Dr. Seuss

In Mitch Albom's best-selling book, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997), a dying teacher shares what makes him still feel most alive, "when I can make someone smile after they were feeling sad, it's as close to healthy as I ever feel." Humor is a gift. It is also an incredible liberator of thoughts and feelings. It can suspend the rules of time, place, logic, and conduct. Teachers who bring genuine, warm humor into the classroom uplift the spirits of students. They give life to learning and leave themselves and their students more energized and hopeful.

Perhaps humor, like other art forms, is best understood as a kind of aesthetic experience that gives a richness to life. Like any aesthetic encounter, humor has intrinsic value. Moreover, there is pure pleasure in mastery that derives from figuring out humor, such as jokes, riddles, or word play.

This fastback has been about the intentional use of purposeful humor. The goal is for students and teach-

ers to be happier about learning. But intentionality involves planning. Humor will not always "just happen." If we are convinced of its power, it behooves us to make sure it is a part of our teaching.

Unfortunately, many educators still think laughter and humor are frivolous and obstruct serious scholarly pursuits. Teachers cannot help but project their own world view to students. If a teacher is fearful and rigid, then the idea of humor will be threatening, along with all the kinds of thinking it represents: flexibility, creativity, imagination. What's more, a teacher's lack of humor is recognized as a source of student demotivation (Gorham and Christophel 1990). As John Morreall asks, "Is it any wonder that, under the tutelage of such teachers, children who come to school at age five with imagination, playfulness, and curiosity, have lost these qualities — at least in the classroom — within a year or two?" (1981, p. 69). Controlling individuals who cling to rigidity and conformity are uncomfortable with the freewheeling force of humor. As Koestler (1979) said, "Dictators fear laughter more than bombs."

Humor does have its dangers, and it is the wise teacher who knows its force. If it occurs at the wrong moment or is inappropriate, it can destroy a mood or distract attention. If it gets out of hand, it can turn a classroom into a circus. And if it ridicules (like sarcasm), feelings can be hurt. Humor can belittle and denigrate, leaving the recipient feeling powerless.

Humor is integral to nearly every aspect of human life. Teachers with a sense of humor bring joy to them-

selves and show students an important dimension of being human.

Unfortunately, research shows that students rank humor in the classroom as more important to learning than teachers do (Weaver and Cotrell 1986). To become fully functioning humans, students must learn to use, and seem to want to learn to use, humor appropriately. But it is the teacher that determines the "classroom weather." Haim Ginot asks each teacher to remember:

> I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate, humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized. (*Between Teacher and Child*, 1985)

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The Bessie F. Gabbard Initiative on Leadership in Education for the 21st Century, dubbed the 2000-2001 Celebration for short, reaffirms the central importance of the Phi Delta Kappa tenet of leadership. Bessie F. Gabbard (1905-2001), the "First Lady" of PDK and a member and longtime chair of the board of governors of the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, provided the impetus for this initiative, which will focus the energies of PDK members and staff during the two years of transition to the new millennium. During this 2000-2001 Celebration, special attention will be paid to leaders and leadership in education with a particular focus on PDK's traditional advocacy on behalf of the public schools.

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The little guy gets a friendly push in this playground scene from October 1923.

Courtesy of the Cleveland Public Library Photograph Collection.